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Adam Curtis as remixologist: The case for metajournalism as radical practice

Abstract

In his work for the BBC over the last thirty years, Adam Curtis has tracked some of the main currents of our sociopolitical world. From idiosyncratic films such as *Just Another Day: Walton on the Naze (1983)* to more experimental and polemical films such *Bitter Lake (2015)* and *HyperNormalisation (2016),* his creative use of archive, editing and sound design are unique within the journalistic culture of the BBC.

Curtis consistently pushes the boundaries of journalistic practice within the BBC while his texts have evolved to reflect the wider changes in media consumption and new forms of dissemination. This paper will explore the characteristics and techniques of remix culture, apply these to his journalism and assess the shifts in his practice.

Curtis's remix techniques also provide a critique of the practices of televisual documentary and can be situated as a form of metajournalism. The paper also explores his metajournalistic practice and analyses, in depth, his recent film, *Bitter Lake (2015)*. The paper concludes by arguing that that the recent work of Adam Curtis is a radical departure from previous forms of televisual documentary journalism that has the potential to challenge contemporary forms of practice.

Key Words

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Adam Curtis: An Experimental Journalist

Adam Curtis's work for the BBC has established him as one of the most experimental journalists of the late-televisual age. While Curtis speculates on how new forms of power operate, he is also critical of how the complexities of our modern world are reported (Darke, 2012; Pollard, 2014). Curtis has pushed the boundaries of journalism within the constraints of the public service broadcasting culture of the BBC (Glazzard, 2015; Keith, 2013; Millard, 2010).

Curtis has also updated his methods and techniques in order to adapt to the digital age and his BBC blog, *The Medium and the Message,* was heralded as a new way to connect with audiences (BBC 2009). His recent film, *Bitter Lake (2015),* was one of the first iPlayer only productions (Harris, 2015). He has also produced live performances at the Manchester International Festival with Damon Albarn and Massive Attack and these collaborations demonstrate the trajectory of his practice towards more experimental forms of documentary. This is evident in his obscure sampling selections, unusual editing techniques and the fusing of archive journalistic material and found footage into new narratives. Curtis has adopted the techniques of the remixologists to produce journalistic material who, as Navas argues, create forms of cultural production from existing material that take the new creative work beyond their initial possibilities (Navas, 2012: 93). Curtis utilises the remix method to produce journalistic material and this provokes the question of whether remix offers a method for a new, digitally aware, radical journalism. This suggests that Curtis's practice is challenge and critique of existing televisual journalism and that remix could be a method to achieve such a challenge and critique.

Curtis clearly defines himself as a journalist and has consistently done so in a range of interviews (Adams, 2004; Darke, 2012; Eaves; Harris, 2015; Obrist, 2012a, 2012b; Pollard, 2014). His work on the *That's Life!* television programme allowed him to craft his journalism, to develop his editing skills and to hone a distinctive voice (Adams, 2004). It also introduced him to the creative potential held within the vast BBC archives (Adams, 2004). Millard (2010) has described how his films, such as *The Power of Nightmares (2004)* juxtapose:

> images grabbed from news, stock and archival footage, and from advertising and corporate documentaries, and layered from text and graphics that move towards or away from us. These images have been re-purposed, placed side by side with interviews and meticulously organised, to construct an argument, to interrogate what Curtis sees as contemporary myths. (Millard, 2010:168)

Curtis collects sources from archives, ideas and techniques from the spheres of art, film and literature and then collages a journalistic narrative. Whilst this situates Adam Curtis as an experimental journalist, it also points towards his aesthetic radicalism (Cramerotti, 2009). He cites three clear influences on his style of journalism. The major influences are the experimental literary collages of John Dos Passos (Darke, 2012). Dos Passos used found texts such as headlines, journalism, political speeches, reportage and songs in his work and utilized techniques such as the 'Newsreel' and 'Camera Eye' which were influenced by experimental forms of journalism; such as the *Living Newspapers*, the *Federal Theater Projects* and the Soviet *Kino Pravda* newsreels (Suarez, 1999). The creative possibilities from these traditions echo in

Curtis's journalism. The second influence is the film cameraman Erik Durschmied and Curtis has praised his 'timelessness', 'good eye' and 'visual sense' (Darke, 2012). The artist, Robert Rauschenberg, is another major influence and his work demonstrated that: 'you can actually take content, take journalism, but also fuse it with collage techniques, art' (Darke, 2012). Other influences on his work are less explicit. Curtis discounts Jean-Luc Godard as being an important influence but anyone familiar with Godard's work will recognise some technical similarities and the shared exploration of the radical possibilities of film. Likewise, Curtis has claimed that while he admires the films of Chris Marker, there are differences of approach between his documentary journalism and the essay film that are expressed through the voiceover: (Rosenbaum, 2008: 75)

> ….I have a deep, almost nerdy, desire to explain. To fill up every space I can with me yakking, right? Or deliberately putting things together to say something. Which is the journalist. Which is what I am (Darke, 2012).

Curtis therefore places his arguments and exposition at the forefront of his work and Rosenbaum has argued that his voiceover on *The Power of Nightmares (2004) and All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace (2011)* resemble 'freeform riffs sailing *over* the arguments, a bit like a jazz improvisation' (Rosenbaum 2008, 72). Millard (2010) has argued that his narration is distinct 'from the traditions of journalism and current affairs, which prefer a more balanced approach' (Millard 2010, 167). His subversion of this convention chimes with Stella Bruzzi's comments on the subversive and transgressive potential of the 'archetypical solid male narrator' (Bruzzi 2000, 40). Some critics have also identified a sophisticated sonic experimentalism in his work and how this inverts the conventional use of music in documentary: (Keith, 2013)

> Music permits his documentaries to be simultaneously serious and frivolous, controversial and entertaining; it also reminds the viewer that the documentary, far from being objective, represents one interpretation of the event (Keith 2013, 174).

While Curtis is keen to portray himself as a journalist, situating himself within this occupational sphere is double-edged. It allows him to tap into the cultural prestige of the BBC but also invites ridicule from those who disparage his work as subjective or obscurantist (Walters, 2011). If Curtis's work has sometimes been at odds with the forms of television journalism that are prevalent within the BBC, he found a niche in the BBC during a period of institutional change (Born, 2005). Born has argued that the period when Curtis established himself at the BBC coincided with a period of 'accelerated change not only for journalism but also for factual television' (Born, 2005; 376). One of John Birt's reforms of the BBC news department during this period established the 'mission to explain', a fundamental change in approach, which led to the reduction in the amount of news stories, while 'in depth analysis blossomed, with the result that news stole some of the analytical fire of current affairs' (Born 2005, 386). Birt's reforms also led to wider cultural shifts within BBC journalism and a 'mining of the inherently instable borders between documentary and current affairs' (Born 2005, 376). The 'mission to explain' also focused on cultivating new forms of innovative storytelling. Curtis's place on the hazy borders of BBC current affairs,

documentary and news journalism allowed his work to flourish in environment that encouraged analysis and new narratives.

Curtis's niche in the BBC inevitably draws attention to the oft-debated links between journalism and documentary practice. While there are fundamental differences in approach, they are linked by a shared imperative to tell stories about people, events and places, using original source material. Corner (1996) has drawn attention to the shifts in documentary from the cinematic towards the televisual and how the shift from the cinematic essay demonstrates that 'documentary television has been dominated by the journalistic – the use of the documentary form as means of expanded reportage' (Corner 1996, 2). Curtis has recently commented that this processes has now reversed with documentary moving from television back into the cinema (Curtis, 2016b). Nevertheless, important shifts towards the essayistic roots of documentary have occurred in the early twenty-first century. Cook et al (2015) have drawn attention to how the differences between journalism and documentary are manifested around 'intent and form' (Cook et al 2015, 20). Goode (2009) has focused on journalism as a 'craft of *re*-telling stories rather than simply disclosing them' that involves 'translating both human and documentary sources' (Goode 2009, 1290). These tensions can be bridged by using remix as a critical framework and by assessing metajournalism as a practice. Curtis's recent work on *Bitter Lake (2015)* strips out some of the journalistic exposition and narration by reducing his reliance on the 'voice of god' narration and using image sequences to tell the story. By extending the range of sources, refining his editing techniques and adopting new narrative strategies, his experimentalism has shifted towards a radical remix practice.

Remix Culture and Documentary

Remix culture and the associated practices of remixology have infiltrated almost every aspect of our mediatized world but they also have clear distinctions from other forms of media culture and creative practice. Manovich (2005) has outlined the distinctions between the pre-digital forms of remix that 'appropriated' and 'quoted' other works and how digitalisation and web technologies have driven us towards a remix culture (Manovich 2005, 2007). Manovich (2013) has also suggested that if postmodernism was a defining paradigm of the 1980's, then since the 1990's remix has emerged as the dominant aesthetic of the globalization era and can be situated as 'the cultural logic of networked global capitalism' (Manovich 2013, 267). Jenkins (2006) has also argued that digitalisation and 'convergence culture' dominate our present era. Drawing on the work of both, Fagerjord (2010) suggests that remix now supercedes convergence and this is especially true in terms of how the borders of documentary and feature film are blurred on video sharing sites such as YouTube.

> First of all, the principal distinction that sets the genres of documentary and the feature apart from other genres is the text's relation to *reality*. A documentary film is made primarily from non-fiction photographic footage. News is another genre that rests upon the idea that it is real, relatively objective and true. A genre's relation to reality is another aspect that can be remixed (Fagerjord 2010, 193).

Navas (2012) has noted that remix culture concerns the 'recombination of material, which extends beyond music to culture at large' (Navas 2012, 172). Campanelli

(2015) has focused on the issue of authenticity and argued that remix culture depends on the idea of unoriginality and that it is driven by the global expansion of digital media (Campanelli 2015, 77). While Borschke (2015) has argued for the radical potential of the remix and suggested that the 'transformative use' of remix can be subversive, 'a strategy of resistance' that challenges institutions (Borschke 2015, 109). All of these perspectives can be useful when assessing the value of remix for the emerging forms of journalism, however they also have a value when considering more radical forms of journalism.

The radical potential of the remix depends on accessible digital archives that allow the reinvention of new material from unoriginal material. The sampling of archive material is fundamental to remix practices, the potential of which has been realized in the digital era. The digitalization of texts and their circulation and storage on the web have transformed remix practice from one associated with the art and music worlds into a set of practices which range across all aspects of culture and industry (Manovich, 2005). Navas argues that samples are combined to create new texts, which create new source relationships (Navas 2012, 81). It is clear that the impact of sampling has had a significant effect on the music industry but the creative use of samples is now integral to all areas of creative practice in the era of the mash-up (Navas, 2012). Lessig (2008) has stated that 'remixed media may quote sounds over images, or video over text, or text over sounds. The quotes get mixed together. The mix produces the new creative work-the remix' (Lessig 2008, 69). As Manovich (2015) has argued, the authenticity and meaning embedded in remixed texts are contingent with the cultural value of the sources and the origin of the sampled material; 'in a modern(ist) artwork, these parts are created specifically for this composition. In remix, they are selected from a larger already existing set (Manovich, 2015: 142). Therefore sampling depends on the appropriateness and unoriginality of the archive material.

John Ellis (2012) has outlined how the sampling of digital material is linked to the development of film technologies and how reality is captured and has noted that 'moving image and sound both sample from the real to create an artefact based on the wonderful illusion of real-seemingness to the 'mind of anyone watching' (Ellis 2012, 36). Ellis argues that digital technologies have made this relationship clearer and that digital image making has 'made the ordinary user far more aware of the textual nature of the moving image and the selectivity that exists at it very heart' (Ellis, 2012:36). This new relationship has fundamentally changed some aspects of documentary practice that are evident in both the types of documentary texts that are now possible and the truth claims of documentary. This new relationship between reality and truth draws attention to new texts that are created through the sampling of archive material.

Another characteristic of the remix is how material is edited. Editing creates tensions and links that allow new narratives to emerge out of the remixed text. The remix can then become rhetorical by:

> creating links between samples by exploiting and leveraging the audience's understanding of the samples in their original contexts. When DJ's choose a sample of music, for example, their selection is rhetorical because they deem one sample to be more appropriate than another (Church 2015, 44).

Remixed texts are also evidenced by the repetition of different themes, motifs and samples and how these relate to the rhythm of the text. As Church (2015) has argued repetition has been used as a rhetorical device to familiarise an audience with ideas (Church 2015, 47). Repetition in remix has its roots in Jamaican DJ culture which 'created new or altered versions (revisions) of already existent songs. In Jamaican dub the repetition is never a return to the identical' (Campanelli 2015, 77). Church has also shown that repetition has an educational and rhetorical function and is 'key for structural reinforcement; through recurring motifs, themes and lyrics' (Church 2015, 47). With remix first being evidenced in music cultures, sound has particular importance within remix culture. Borschke has argued that sound design does not necessarily have to refer to quotations or samples but can create new meanings (Borschke 2015, 106)

The practice of remix involves the sequencing of samples with a rhetorical function into a coherent text; often using repetitions to provoke an emotional response. Navas (2012) has argued that remixing also goes beyond the creation of texts to become a complex set of practices that impact on culture and 'demonstrate that the power of remixing lies in its effectiveness as action and aesthetic' (Navas 2012, 84). He has also argued that this practice is now a 'tendency' that extends to all cultural spheres and one that changes the aesthetic of the new text at a 'meta-level, thus giving the user the option to cut or copy based on aesthetics, rather than the limitations of media' (Navas 2012, 17). Remix practices when applied to documentary journalism can be potentially critical and radical.

Remix as Metajournalism

Televisual documentary journalism combines different texts; images, sounds, words and graphics are fused to make sense of contemporary events in way that has cultural meaning. However, the creative practices of collage are antithetical to many of the rituals often associated with traditional journalistic production. We only have to assess the widespread condemnation and vilification of Johann Hari, when his 'creative' sourcing methods were uncovered to see what happens to a journalist who plays fast and loose with their sources and texts (Aitkenhead, 2015). Nevertheless, collage techniques do not necessarily inhibit traditional journalistic values such as accuracy and transparency and have been effectively assimilated into journalism, such as that of the New Journalists like Hunter Thompson and Tom Wolfe (Thompson, 1971, 1979; Wolfe, 1968, 1970). Whilst collage is still associated with the literature, music and art of modernism, a number of theorists such as Mark Amerika, Lawrence Lessig, Lev Manovich and Eduardo Navas have argued that collage is now superseded by the remix. Sonvilla-Weiss (2015) has argued that the cut and paste aspects of remix are also reflected in the development of journalism practice that forms the basis for some traditional journalistic conventions.

> The development of the printing press made possible the standardization and comparison of text production in a freer and more critical way, and the possibility of simply transferring, for instance, a loss-free quotation from one sign vehicle to another, enabled a very early form of remix culture. Many of the punctuation conventions we know derive from this period, for example, how a quotation can be modified so that it remains a direct quote while seamlessly fitting into a new text (Sonvilla-Weiss 2015, 54).

Other realist visual forms, such as the found footage film, also have origins in early forms of avant-garde and remix practices. Bell (2011) has argued that the found footage film; selected from sources as varied as commercial stock footage, fiction films, home movies and newsreels, has important distinctions with the televisual documentary that centre around 'problematizing the sources it uses' and can link new narratives to the past (Bell 2011, 16). Rascaroli (2008) has placed the essay film within the realm of the 'expository mode' of documentary and outlined the different approaches to voice over between documentary and the essay film, which is 'always and necessarily unique and original' (Nichols, 1991; Rascaroli 2008, 39). Thus the remixing of televisual archive footage problematises how the past is understood in the present by recontextualising previously broadcast material and creating new narratives that can also be given addition authority by an institutional 'voice of god' commentary.

One of the key connections between remix practices and journalism is the critique of professional practices and sources within the remixed text. Navas (2012) provides a model for remix based on the theoretical work of Foucault, Benjamin and Atalli which can be applied to remix as critique:

> Remix is more like a virus that has mutated into different forms according to the needs of different cultures. Remix, itself, has no form, but it is quick to take on any form and medium. It needs cultural value to be at play in order to take effect; in this sense Remix is parasitical, Remix is meta-always unoriginal. At the same time when implemented effectively, it can become a tool of autonomy (Navas 2012, 127).

If remix is intrinsically 'meta' how can this be applied to journalism and used to initiate a radical practice? Metajournalism can be defined as a piece of journalism that (consciously or subconsciously) critiques the circumstances of its construction (Deuze, 2001, 2003). Metajournalism or 'journalism about journalism', critiques the codes and conventions at play within journalistic practices (Deuze, 2003). This can take a number of forms, a narrow definition would suggest that it can be a new form of practice that is allied to journalism, such rating, tagging, commenting and reposting (Goode, 2009). Metajournalism can also provide sophisticated approaches to journalism that embeds archived original journalism, such as a Youtube clip, a Tweet and archived sources of televisual news within new pieces of journalism. Goode discussed the production and practice of social news and citizen journalism and has also argued for a broader definition for journalism that depends on the blending of journalistic and metajournalistic practices (Goode 2009, 1291).

> It is possible to maintain an analytical distinction between journalism and metajournalism but their separation also risks obscuring the potentially radical implications for democracy and the public sphere as citizens increasingly engage in aspects of news making that were previously opaque and, for the most part, off limits (Goode 2009, 1291).

The most persuasive definition of metajournalism that is relevant to forms of televisual documentary journalism is that it refers to a televisual documentary text that uses archived documentary sources to tell a new story while simultaneously critiquing the codes and conventions of televisual documentary. Many of these

aspects of remix and metajournalism have some relevance when we assess the working practices of Adam Curtis. His place in the biggest public service news provider in the world gives his work cultural authority but his position at the margins of the BBC's journalistic culture is also one that also gives him some autonomy from the norms and conventions of the wider occupational sphere of BBC documentary and current affairs journalism. This position allows his metajournalism to filter and mediate archive material into a critical remixed journalism.

The Remixed Practice of Adam Curtis

Curtis has suggested that new arguments and stories can be pieced together from fragments of archived news (Cocker 2010). Keith (2013) has argued that 'as such his archive-based approach is additionally a comment on the unavoidable construction of narrative in news reporting and documentary' (Keith 2013, 163). These comments support arguments that Curtis's work can be situated at a 'meta-level' but also resonate with the way that storytelling was placed at the forefront of BBC news, which was such a feature of the reforms introduced by John Birt when he was Director General. Curtis's work flourished in the environment of the BBC but also critiqued the output. If we move onto a more nuanced assessment of the characteristics of his critical remix practice we can also assess the radical potential of metajournalism.

Adam Curtis's work challenges many of our assumptions about the function of documentary journalism and whether it can be both factual and neutral (Keith, 2013:162). Rosenbaum (2008) has suggested that the archive material and the use of found footage act as 'vehicles of persuasion' to support Curtis's voiceover and narration (Rosenbaum 2008, 73). Keith (2013) has also argued that it is the mixture of the established type of news material with the more obscure or leftfield sonic and visual samples that are characteristics of his editing.

> Unusual editing techniques are sometimes used, occasionally clips are run backwards, looped back and forth, colour saturated beyond recognition, or shown in rapid succession (around six to eight frames long). This suggests that visuals, like music are used for their associative and emotional, rather than narrative impact (Keith 2013, 164).

Curtis's practice also revisits the techniques of the 1960's avant-garde and this is evident in how he frames and edits his interviews to explicitly subvert broadcast interview conventions. He often deploys the jump-cut technique, an abrupt transition between images which disrupts the audiences understanding of time and space. This technique draws attention to the constructed nature of narratives and it has become more prevalent in the age of remix. However, this editing technique is rarely utilised within broadcast journalism in general, and especially within BBC news, because the jump cut disrupts continuity editing and established journalistic conventions such as sequential shooting, which are the building blocks of television news. Sequential shooting and the five-shot sequence, employ a range of shots – close ups, medium shots and wide shots - that can easily be edited together in sequence to tell a visual narrative. These conventions have been utilised within broadcast journalism to mask the construction of reality. Curtis's utilisation of the jump-cut reveals the artifice underpinning these conventions and can be situated as form of critique. The location

and framing of his interviews are often incongruous and disrupt the interviewee's legitimacy and power. The interview questions are often part of the narrative and further establish Curtis as a character, out of shot, in his own drama (Bruzzi, 2000, Rosenbaum, 2008). Both of these devices work on a meta-level and critique the circumstances of journalistic production and draw attention to more subconscious elements of news framing.

The repetition in Curtis's work comes from his sampling selections that reoccur across texts, and it is also evident in how ideas and tropes reappear throughout his work. This repetition can be rhetorical in terms of how arguments are delivered, visual in terms of how material is used across the films but also narrative in terms of his story-telling techniques. The sound design in Curtis's work is particularly important because it incorporates both his exposition and musical selections, which underscore his narration (Keith 2013, 165). The use of sound is eclectic, emotional, persuasive and rhetorical and 'often contradicts or contrasts with, rather than reinforces, the expected emotional response to the image displayed, a technique associated with irony and surrealism' (Keith 2013, 165). The sound design foregrounds how contradictions appear when images are remixed with sound. Another aspect of Curtis's sound design is how humor is used to evoke an emotional response. This explains his use of familiar music samples, film soundtracks and techniques 'borrowed from dramatic film, notably the use of ironic sound and the use of jarring music to disrupt the emotional response' (Keith 2013, 174). Rosenbaum has drawn attention to Curtis's off-screen voice and the use of the third person in his scripts. The 'voice of god' style of commentary explicitly and directly lays out a point of view, but he also subverts this approach by juxtaposing his voiceover with contradictory images and music to foreground some of the double standards inherent in the codes and conventions of mainstream practice (Rosenbaum 2008, 75). Again, this subversion draws attention to conventions and suggests that his journalism also works at the meta-level.

The final characteristic of Curtis's appropriation of remix techniques is how typography is deployed to remix arguments and ideas. Graphics, typography and subtitles become integral aspects of his scripts and are used for affective and emotional responses. These remix techniques are all applicable to an assessment of his work and Millard (2010) has commented that the *Power Of Nightmares* has 'a density of imagery and quotation that may distinguish them from works produced before the advent of digital technologies and a broader acceptance of the culture of the remix' (Millard 2010, 167). This density and layering of samples allows Curtis to produce journalistic work that also provides self-reflective insights into the construction of journalistic texts. All of these aspects of remix practice are further developed in the analysis of *Bitter Lake (2015).*

Curtis's work for the BBC often provokes criticism that it obscures more than it reveals and it is often parodied (Woodhams, 2011). Armando Iannucci and Chris Morris revealed the artifice behind televisual news conventions in *The Day Today,* which effectively parodied the current affairs and newsgathering activities of the BBC. The BBC has also been subject to a range of criticisms about news production practices and discourses that are 'heavily reliant on elite and official sources, to the detriment of less powerful and accredited groups' (Born 2005, 379). A recent University of Cardiff study has drawn attention to this lack of balance in BBC news

output (Lewis, 2014). Curtis's work provides a counter-balance to the more elitist forms of BBC journalism, draws attention to issues of diversity within its news programming but it also critiques the discourses of news reporting (Brooker, 2007, 2009). Born (2015) has commented that the informative and the aesthetic dimensions of the televisual medium are essential components of public service television. Curtis's work resonates with contemporary digital practices and consumption patterns and this allows his journalism to be situated as a publicly funded corrective to the more mainstream forms of BBC televisual journalism. While his sources were once primarily drawn from the vast BBC archives, his more recent work explores more eclectic sources. His work can now be seen to be more reflective of the remixed journalism of films such as *The Black Power Mix Tape (2011)* which innovatively reused and remixed the Swedish televisual archive to re-evaluate the Black Power movement. Hearne (2015) has commented that both objectivity and the processes of journalism are scrutinised in this remixed text (Hearne 2015, 32).

Another example of his metajournalistic practice, at least within the context of the BBC, was his use of the blog platform. BBC news journalists have used blogs to clarify their working practices, provide explanations for editorial choices, defend omissions and as a forum to own-up to mistakes (Rippon 2012; BBC 2012). Alfred Hermida (2009) outlined how the BBC incorporated blogging into its news work in order to connect with new audiences. Curtis has acknowledged that his blog, *The Medium and the Message,* creates a different relationship with the audience that chimes with the practice of digital journalism (Darke, 2012). In the blog Curtis samples original news footage alongside extended clips of archived current affairs programmes then builds new narratives direct from the BBC archives. The blog is a palette to develop ideas, motifs and themes, which are then remixed and then subsequently explored in his films. The extended blog posts provide evolving and synthesizing narratives. While the blog is distinctive for its long-form journalism, the sequences of video also allow for a deeper exploration of narrative by providing much of the original material in unedited form. The absence of his characteristic and distinctive voice-over and elaborate sound design allows the exposition of the original sources to take centre stage in the narrative. Curtis's trademark typography reflects his 'brand identity' within the BBC, introduces the titles of his online journalism, appears throughout his films and is a key feature of his 'live' work.

Curtis has been vocal about the failures of modern journalism and this has also inspired his metajournalism. The *Power of Nightmares (2004)* emerged during one of the most serious crises in BBC journalism, but ironically this crisis was directly related to BBC journalists performing, albeit belatedly, the very journalistic function that Curtis was critiquing – the questioning of the government in the aftermath of the Iraq intervention. The reporting of the Iraq war 'focused mainly on the progress of the war, an approach favoured by the embedding of journalists with the military, rather than examining the case for war' (Born 2005, 456). As Curtis has said;

> Normally I'm quite playful, and looking askance at things. With that, I was really angry because I thought a lot of my colleagues were misreporting something really badly. I'm not saying there wasn't a terrorist threat, I'm just saying they were distorting it (Darke, 2012).

Some of the BBC coverage of post-war Iraq challenged the British government's claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This led to a major crisis at the BBC when Britain's expert on WMD's spoke to a number of BBC journalists outlining his concerns about how intelligence was used to make the case for war. When one of these reporters, Andrew Gilligan, reported these concerns and made the famous remark that the Iraq dossier had 'probably' been 'sexed up', the government responded by demanding that the source be revealed. The subsequent death of the source, David Kelly, led to an independent judicial inquiry with wide and lasting repercussions for journalism at BBC.

The Hutton Inquiry heavily criticised the BBC's newsgathering and editorial processes and resulted in the resignations of the Chairman, the Director General and Andrew Gilligan. The subsequent reforms within the BBC could not save it from further controversy and accusations of poor editorial judgment. The Savile and McAlpine affairs brought more accusations of poor journalistic practice, complex editorial processes and confused leadership (Ray, 2014). Curtis's metajournalism has to be placed in the context of these crises, which have forced the BBC to examine its news production processes, editorial structures and leadership. This self-reflection was particularly relevant for the newsgathering and current affairs departments of the BBC (Born, 2005). These crises have also provided inspirations for Curtis's 'journalism about journalism' and his critique of contemporary journalistic practices was even more explicitly expressed in two short films for Charlie Brooker's *Screenwipe* and *Newswipe* (Brooker, 2007, 2009).

Another way we can assess the metajournalism of Adam Curtis is to recontextualise the working practices of BBC journalists. Gaye Tuchman (1971) famously argued that the journalistic understanding of objectivity is a 'strategic ritual', constructed via stylistic devices and rituals such as balanced sources, the inverted pyramid and the use of quotations (Tuchman, 1971). The BBC's journalism was founded on the twin poles of objectivity and also what Georgina Born has called its own 'special invention', impartiality (Born, 2015). Born has argued that just as print journalists often deploy the objectivity defence; BBC journalists often use the editorial guidelines on impartiality to defend how they represent the moral consensus; 'impartiality was a source of authority and defence against accusations of partisanship, and it was buttressed by the corporation's claim to position itself within what it defined rhetorically as the moral consensus' (Born 2015, 382). She argues that objectivity and impartiality operate as 'performative fictions or 'strategic rituals' that bind the professional journalistic culture, provide ethical moorings and augment its credibility' (Born 2015, 382). Curtis's meta-journalism draws attention to these 'performative fictions' by revealing the artifice behind broadcast news and demonstrating the power relations inherent within the conventions of BBC journalism.

If Curtis's journalism uses the material of the past, to critique the present, it can also be argued that his work often anticipates the future. For instance, *The Mayfair Set* (1999) subtitled 'Four Stories about the Rise of Business and the Decline of Political Power' anticipates the conditions that led to the financial crash in 2008 by examining the rise of buccaneering capitalists, warning about the dangers inherent in predatory capitalism and assessing the impact of weak political systems and unregulated banking systems. *The Power of Nightmares* (2004) outlined the complicity of the media in the rise of Al Qaeda and foreshadowed the contemporary reportage of Daesh.

The live performance *Everything Is Going To Plan* (2013) examined the rise of Trump, Putin, social media and contemporary news culture and was a call-to-arms for citizens to change the future (Adams, 2013). His most recent film *HyperNormalisation (2016)* revisits these themes but remixes this material into a newer, darker narrative that reflects the rise of President-elect Trump, the Brexit vote in the UK and the political resurrection of the far right. Curtis's future-orientated perspective places him firmly at the cutting edge of radical journalistic practice and provides potential new pathways towards a journalism that is more relevant to digital audiences. These questions have been explored in his live performances at the Manchester International Festival but the most recent examples of remixed metajournalism are available to view and download on the iPlayer platform.

Bitter Lake (2015) as Remixed Meta-Journalism

The potential for remixed metajournalism has recently been showcased on the iPlayer platform with Curtis's most recent film projects for the BBC. The following critical discourse analysis provides insights into how remix techniques can be applied to produce metajournalism and how these are manifested in *Bitter Lake (2015)*. This film explores the recent history of Afghanistan through the prism of British, US, Soviet and jihadist interventions. For those critics who view Curtis as an obscurantist, his overview of Afghan history in *Bitter Lake* contains 'ruthless simplifications' that might support their viewpoint but these also might tell us some 'uncomfortable truths', and contain 'profound insights' (Glazzard 2015, 92).

Bitter Lake (2015) reevaluates the 1945 meeting between the US President Theodore Roosevelt and the Saudi Leader Ibn Saud and explains how this led to the development of an alliance between the USA and Saudi Arabia. The historian Andrew Glazzard argues that while this meeting took place, the focus of the meeting was to secure Saud's support for a Jewish state in Palestine and Syrian independence from the French (Glazzard 2015, 91). Curtis remixes this historical narrative to focus the story on the forging the Saudi Arabia/US alliance. Glazzard (2015) also notes some significant omissions from the narrative that invite further analysis. For instance, Curtis describes Saud's alliance with Wahhabist warriors, the Ikhwan, and his subsequent attempts to eradicate them. Glazzard notes that Curtis does not 'mention Britain's role in suppressing the Ikhwan' (Glazzard 2015, 91). This demonstrates Curtis's selective use of the historical facts but also how the focus of his narrative is projected into the future, because *Bitter Lake (2015)* goes on to situate the spread of Wahhabism throughout the Islamic world into a wider historical story. Glazzard has also drawn attention to Curtis's script and argued that his discourse; 'caricatures Wahhabism, unable to resist applying epithets such as 'dark', 'dangerous', 'destructive', 'pessimistic', 'intolerant', 'radical' and 'anti-modern' at every mention' (Glazzard 2015, 91). While Glazzard has suggested that the archive often drives rather than supports Curtis's arguments, he neglects the primary point about his use of the archive. Curtis is a storyteller and the archive is a resource to be remixed and sampled to tell new stories about our world.

The archive allows Curtis to find new ways to subvert narrative conventions and journalistic exposition by engaging in metajournalism. His selection of footage critiques the discourses of the BBC's news, current affairs and factual programming. In *Bitter Lake (2015)*, the BBC archives provide a range of televisual sources. The

most notable samples from these archives are two sources from the 1970's, which are deployed in two separate sequences. In one sequence he samples archive footage from the children's TV show, *Blue Peter*, and uses footage of the presenter, Valerie Singleton, on the Mall with some Afghan hounds. They are on the Mall to watch a Royal procession and to meet the King of Afghanistan. The Singleton voiceover sample is cut between images of procession and states:

> The King of Afghanistan seemed delighted to see us. For the first time in their lives British Afghan hounds were seeing people from their own country because in the carriages that followed the Queen there were more people from the Royal Court of Afghanistan" (Curtis, 2015a).

Curtis's voiceover responds directly to the Singleton sample, invoking the call and response of remixed music texts, and states 'but the ordered world, where Kings and Queens ruled and dogs behaved obediently, was about to collapse' (Curtis, 2015a). This comment on British colonial and elitist discourses is also reflected in a subtle sample sourced from a documentary film about the hippy trail in Afghanistan. A young man, a representative stereotype of the counter-culture, describes his journey through the Afghanistan and states; 'a traveler is someone who proceeds through a country under his own initiative and with a certain internal drive to learn to find out something more than the superficial' (Curtis; 2015a). The sequence demonstrates the hedonism of the counter culture, the naivety of the era and critiques the orientalist attitude of western travellers. It also repeats a key theme of Curtis work: the failures of the baby-boomer generation to respond the possibilities of their time, which is a focus of films such as *All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace (2011).*

Two contemporary BBC news sequences are also sampled to support this critique of British attitudes and reflect on the last British intervention into Afghanistan. The first sample is footage of a young female lecturer discussing the artist, Marcel Duchamp, with a group of Afghan women in a classroom. This sequence is almost surreal in its incongruity and points to the failures of the British and US governments to plan for a post-Taliban Afghanistan. It also hints at the lack of cultural understanding and the naivety of the nation builders. Glazzard (2015) recognizes that this sequence demonstrates Curtis's ability to find footage that illustrates a particular point while also skillfully editing the footage in order to provoke a reaction because 'it does not need any commentary to show that here is the West hubristically trying to reshape a country it has failed to understand' (Glazzard 2015, 91). This is further demonstrated in a sequence when a British army commander meets local Afghan elders and screens the BBC television series *The Blue Planet.*

A sample sourced from a BBC interview with Mohammed Karzai also comments on the naïve and simplistic news framing within the BBC's coverage of Afghanistan. In this interview Karzai refuses to engage with a reporter's questions about corruption in his new government and he consistently stays on message. This sequence both highlights the diminishing power of the media to hold politicians to account but also how the media, and the BBC in this instance, are complicit in these neo-imperial interventions by failing their public service duty to explain the complexities of Afghanistan.

A number of cinematic samples provide a more light-hearted critique of British attitudes. The samples of *Carry on Up the Khyber (1968)* satirise British imperialism but also adds a layer of humour to an otherwise serious narrative. These samples all finish on familiar *Carry On* tropes; as Sid James states 'and up yours!' and 'so gentlemen, as always we will carry on as if nothing was going to happen', signifying the colloquial British humour and establishment attitudes. A 'blacked-up' Bernard Breslaw, in tribal costume shouts 'Kill the pigs!' (Curtis; 2015a). The second cinematic source is Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris (1972)*. The samples of this film are used to support the main thesis of *Bitter Lake (2015)*, which in itself is borrowed from the Russian journalist, Archan Burovic. The metaphor of the cosmic ocean suggests that attempts to influence Afghanistan are doomed to failure, but more importantly Afghanistan will irradiate back to those who intervene in its politics and therefore influence Soviet, British, US, and international jihadist realities. The logical denouement of the narrative suggests that interventionists cannot believe the truth or trust what they think. As Curtis's voiceover states:

> But few of them stopped to think whether what had happened to the Russians 20 years before might also happen to them. That in a strange way, Afghanistan has revealed the hypocrisy of our own beliefs and that we may be returning from there also haunted by Mujahdeen ghosts, knowing that underneath we believe in nothing (Curtis, 2015a).

The third source of visual material that is sampled in *Bitter Lake* (2015) is footage that was collected, collated and filmed by the BBC cameraman Phil Goodwin. This footage of Afghan citizens, news cameramen and British and US soldiers provides more abstract and emotive footage. This type of footage is often not included in the BBC news narratives of Afghanistan, which tend to use images that are selected to conform to the requirements of continuity editing and then structured into simplistic sequences. One extraordinary sequence both demonstrates how Curtis's editing has pushed his technique towards the remix and also makes full use of this type of visual material. This complex sequence mixes fifty-three images in a three-minute sequence with a modern trance music soundtrack. This sequence resembles a trailer but is placed at the mid-point of the film. The sequence cuts between images of dust clouds, an US attack helicopter, injured cameramen, dancing women, birds, politicians, explosions, banks, cityscapes and terrorists which rewind and remix while the following graphic sequence is intercut between the images:

> At the end of the twentieth century. Faced with a complex and chaotic world. Politicians retreated into simple stories of right and wrong. Moral fables of good versus evil. Politicians in America and Britain gave even more of their power away. To the banks. The financial technocrats promised they could manage the new complexities. But the politicians still wanted to change to the world. So they did what President Reagan had done. They ruthlessly simplified the complex struggles around the world. Into simple stories of good versus evil. And intervened to protect the innocent victims. Osama bin Laden sent a team of jihadists to attack the far enemy. The majority were Saudis. They could get US visas easily. Because of the special relationship between America and Saudi Arabia (Curtis, 2015a).

In *Bitter Lake (2015)* repetition also extends further inside and beyond the text. For example, Curtis's voiceover continually invokes repetition for rhetorical affect and he uses phrases and words such as, 'new world', 'power', 'future', 'control' and 'chaos' in his script to drive his argument and narrative. *Bitter Lake (2015)* also repeats themes, motifs and ideas explored in his previous films, as Curtis reuses a sample that was originally used in *The Mayfair Set* (1999). This sample is extended and shows Sheikh Zaki Yamani, the Saudi Minister of Oil, being interviewed about the changing power relationships between the oil producing and industrialized nations. Curtis's motif of dancers set to music reappears throughout his films but is also modified into a sequence of an Afghan fighter performing dance-like, martial art forms in a tent. The repetition also takes the form of ideas and metaphors explored in previous films such as using the *Dam Busters* theme in the *Power of Nightmares* to lampoon the self-assurance of the British engagement in this conflict (Keith 2013, 170).

Throughout the film, the now familiar sophisticated audio montage is built around eerie sound effects that provoke a sense of unease at key points in the narrative. The soundtrack provides a counterpoint to the images and works on emotions to signify urgency at some points and detachment at other parts in the narrative. Two other aspects of the sound design are striking. The use of David Bowie's, *Bewley Brothers* is notable for the lyrical and visual associations, which evoke the British intervention in Afghanistan (Bowie, 1971). The familiar, but stripped-back, Curtis voiceover insistently expresses his arguments but also complements the choice of music. Another aspect of Curtis's sound design is his use of closed questions. The following exchange demonstrates how this question both shuts down further analysis and supports Curtis's thesis (Curtis, 2015a).

> AC interview: So what your saying is what we thought was the Taliban was actually an allergic reaction to us turning up into the middle of a complex civil war?
> Interviewee: Correct
> AC interview: We made things worse?
> Interviewee: Yes

The use of typography shows how *Bitter Lake (2015)* builds on Curtis's graphic strategies at the Manchester International Festival and is central to his story-telling technique. One example of this technique reveals his links back to earlier forms of exposition such as the 'news reel' but also demonstrates that edited televisual images and sophisticated sound design can create a new remixed narrative; 'In 1964. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Money From The West Flooded In To Buy The Oil. And so did British Business Men. Who wanted to get some of it back' (Curtis, 2015a).

Curtis's Afghan story concludes by critiquing how western politicians and journalists have obscured the real story of these historical interventions and in an echo of his work in the live arena, his voiceover is also an insistent call to change the future.

> Although we have returned from Afghanistan, our leaders also seem to have lost faith in anything and the simple stories they tell us don't make sense any longer. The experience of Afghanistan has made us realise that there is something else out there but we just don't have the apparatus to see it. What is needed is a new story and one that we can believe in (Curtis, 2015a).

Metajournalism as Radical Practice

These shifts towards a remixed metajournalism can be situated as a radical departure from conventional televisual documentary practice. As Navas (2012) has argued, remix is 'meta' and also critical by its inherent nature. Curtis's metajournalism, is an important challenge to contemporary journalistic practice because it reuses the material of the past to critique the present. In the digital world, metajournalism can easily be integrated into journalistic texts but it could also be potentially integrated into texts to aid the reflective practice of journalists (Ramaker et al. 2015). However a more radical approach is to remix a new narrative that functions simultaneously as both a piece of journalism and as a critique of journalism. Curtis's remixed work demonstrates that documentary journalism can be critical, informative and radical. The digital world provides the tools and the practices are utilised in other media spheres but the conventions and philosophies of journalism have not really kept pace with changes in creative practice and media consumption in the digital age. Adam Curtis's techniques resonate with the age of the remix and the challenges to journalistic conventions in his work are the most practical demonstration of his radicalism. Russell (2015) has focused on the critical potential of remix and how this highlights issues of authenticity, authority and authorship and questions the veracity of source material (Russell 2015, 219). If remix can provide a commentary on journalistic codes and conventions, it can also question our understanding of impartiality, interpretation and objectivity as Keith (2013) has argued:

> Curtis's skepticism towards the role of the media and popular consensus in shaping contemporary understandings of events provides some explanation as to why his work does not assume the conventionally 'serious' documentary mode, and why he frequently disavows any pretentions to earnestness and objectivity (Keith 2013, 174).

It is evident that his work re-energises historical journalistic material from the archive but his work hints towards progressive change. Curtis's work deconstructs the past to assess its impact on the contemporary world and is a potential lesson for journalists because it anticipates the possible future outcomes of odd and seemingly disconnected contemporary events. By focusing on the uncanny, quirky and strange interconnectedness of events Curtis's remixed material can critique and 'expose dreams, illusions and masquerades' (Russell 2015, 219). Curtis's method demonstrates that the future is unmade and filled with possibilities and thus, a future-orientated critique is a radical departure from journalistic conventions and philosophies and entertains the possibility of a journalism that is aimed at provoking change. Gunkel (2015) has argued for a philosophical path for remix that 'opens an abyss of terrifying but infinitely different possibilities' (Gunkel. 2015: xxxi). Curtis's method directly confronts the future by reflecting on the spectres of the past and his recent work hints at an understanding of the potential of a progressive critique within journalistic cultures which this is evident in texts such as *Oh Dearism (2009), Everything Is Going To Plan (2013), Bitter Lake (2015)* and *HyperNormalisation (2016)*. Curtis's manifesto clearly outlines his vision:

> You mean, how can you create something that's genuinely different? You look for the story that grabs your imagination and that feels different from anything else. That's all. There's nothing else. Then you've seen the future.

> You can try and copy what you're supposed to do, which you should do, to begin with. But after that, everything is about making sense of the fragments. That's how you see the future (Obrist, 2012b).

Remixed metajournalism therefore provides a radical departure from the ascendant philosophies of journalism and conventional theoretical models of the form. Curtis's practices and texts provide pathways to journalism that serves digitally native consumers that are familiar with creative digital practices, eclectic source material and remix culture. Moreover, Curtis's work addresses one of the flaws in contemporary journalism; it provides context and juxtapositions rather than simplistic one-dimensional narratives. More significantly, as Navas (2012) has argued, the prism of the remix allows for a more complex relationship with the author to emerge 'because writing is no longer seen as something truly original, but as a complex act of resampling - as the reinterpretation of material previously introduced' (Navas 2012, 136).

Remix practice involves reimagining analog communicative techniques and Curtis's work links directly back his radical influences and these are reconstituted to provide new ideas and opportunities to be explored as new forms of digital practice. The curation of archive material on the *Medium and the Message* echoes the experimental writing of Dos Passos. *Bitter Lake* (2015) and *HyperNormalisation (2016)* emulate the storification of modernist America in the *American Trilogy*. Similarly, Curtis's innovative ways of communicating journalistic content in the live arena pushes the boundaries of radical practice. Glazzard has argued that *Bitter Lake (2015)* is an exploration of the power of narrative.

> Any story by its nature is simultaneously true and untrue: even those based on actual events are selective and artistically shaped, while those labeled as 'fiction' often tell more 'truth' than whole books based on facts and figures. It is precisely because they are so fundamental to our lives that we should pay attention to what they say and how they say it. Curtis weaves into his story a story about stories (Glazzard, 2015: 92).

If new forms of analysis and storytelling continue to be integral to the BBC's journalism then the work of Adam Curtis remains an important signpost for its journalism. If we consider his work in the context of the BBC's attempts to reengage with a generation of digital natives that have been bypassed by the corporation, then his work becomes ever more vital. These attempts have, to date, been characterised by technological innovations such as locating televisual material onto online platforms, curating content on iPlayer and integrating streamed content via the Playlister app. Perhaps the true value of Curtis's work is his exploration of more fruitful ways to connect with contemporary audiences by innovatively reusing journalism and remixing content. Digital citizens exist in a remix culture that involves 'making sense of the fragments' and they also have the tools to tell remixed stories about our world. Curtis's departures from conventional journalistic practices towards a remixed metajournalism not only allows him to remix the content of our shared televisual past to interrogate the present but it also allows him to critique contemporary journalistic practices and texts by isolating the constraints of televisual journalism. More importantly, his shift from the avant-garde of television journalism towards remixology refracts new possibilities for metajournalism in the age of remix.

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